
JOHN WILLIAMS



June 25, 1926
Manitoba Penitentiary
Aged 45 years

A veteran of both the South African Boer War and World War One, John Williams was born the son of a coal miner in Wrexham, North Wales on July 23rd, 1880. By the age of 21, he was listed in the census as a "Collier/Coal worker", it was around that time that he served with the Royal Horse Artillery for several years before his emigration to Canada in May 1912 aboard the ship "Ascania". Records show that he married before his emigration, possibly about 1909 when his oldest son was born, but that he came to Canada alone, presumably to find employment in advance of bringing his family. Little is known about his activities in Canada until early in 1915 when he enlisted at Winnipeg with the 5th Field Artillery Brigade of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. In May of that year, he embarked for England aboard the "S.S Corinthian" and by autumn he was in the trenches of France where he spent 3 years and 7 months serving with various Canadian Divisional Ammunition Supply Columns and attaining the rank of Sergeant. During his wartime service, his experience in mining was put to use for a brief time when he was taken on strength with the Royal Engineers at the Mt. Moir Quarries, He returned to

Canada in August of 1919 aboard the “Corsican” with his wife and young son. On March 11th, 1920, he joined the Canadian Penitentiary Service as a guard at Manitoba Penitentiary in Stony Mountain and took up residence on the penitentiary reserve with his family. In private life, Mr. Williams was a member of the Imperial Veteran’s Association of Winnipeg.

Due to his prior experience with explosives, both as a miner in Wales and through his wartime experiences, he was assigned extra duty to assist with excavations for various construction projects at the institution, a necessity at the time as the staff of the penitentiary lacked a Quarry Instructor.

In that capacity, on June 25th, 1926, Guard Williams was in charge of a group of about 20 inmates engaged in blasting rock to excavate the foundation of a new sewage disposal plant within the compound, a project that was intended to improve the sanitary conditions of the institution. The work appeared to be progressing smoothly until a charge of gunpowder failed to detonate. After waiting for a considerable length of time, and after ensuring that his inmate crew was at a safe distance, he cautiously approached the charge. As he bent over it to replace what he believed was a defective fuse, the charge exploded, fracturing his skull and throwing him some distance through the air, killing him instantly. Warden William Meighen was nearby when the blast occurred. He immediately assessed the situation and called for the coroner, Dr. J. Mckee of Stonewall.

On June 28th, his funeral was held in the Anglican Church at Stony Mountain. Rev. Jacob Anderson of Stonewall, Manitoba officiated with the assistance of penitentiary Protestant Chaplain Rev. S.W.L. Stewart and Rev. James W. Anderson of Stony Mountain. To allow as many staff as possible to attend the service, the penitentiary was closed for the afternoon. Warden Meighen and his staff marched in solemn procession to the church to pay their respects to their fellow officer.

In his Annual Report for 1926-1927, Warden Meighen reported, “All the officers and I believe all the inmates, liked Mr. Williams very much, as he attended to his work faithfully, and always was good-natured with his brother officers”

With his coffin covered with the Union Jack, Guard Williams was buried at Brookside Cemetery Winnipeg, with full military honours. The pallbearers were chosen from among his fellow officers.

Guard John Williams was survived by his wife, Beatrice and three children, Albert, Ellinor and John.

In 1998, his name was added to the Canadian Peace Officers' Memorial on Parliament Hill, Ottawa on Tablet #2, script 2.